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## AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

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Every year I am confronted with a large class in freshman English. The course of study exacts that, for composition work, I give this class what is known in textbook phraseology as "narration with and without plot." Now I cannot begin this by saying to my class, "Write a narrative." I might as well tell them to write a Latin or Greek sonnet. So during the first term I attempt nothing more than a sort of apprenticeship in narrative writing, that is, I endeavor to pick up the loose ends of their previous composition work by exercises in sentence-structure, variety of expression, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, and things of similar nature, until I get the class into the habit of writing daily, or two or three times a week, good, well-constructed paragraphs about subjects taken from their everyday life—narratives of their little experiences at home, at play, or at school.

During this time I strive to impress upon them the essentials of good, strong narrative; namely, action and movement with careful selection of details. These I exemplify by reference to their literature, as they are reading at this time *Treasure Island*, *Lady of the Lake*, and similar stirring narratives. By the end of the first term, they have gained a good foundation in the principles of clear, straight-forward narrative without plot, and the beginning of the second term finds them ready to undertake narration with simple plot.

I confess that word "plot" sounds rather appalling for pupils in first-year English, nevertheless they *can* be made to see that if something interferes with the natural course of events in their simple narratives, a complexity of incident will result which *is* a plot. In beginning this subject I usually take some narrative of a simple incident—a buggy-ride, for instance. I ask the pupils to introduce

a "*something*" that will interfere with the course of that ride. Immediately various obstacles are suggested—a piece of paper or an automobile, at which the horse frightens—and before we know it a simple plot is formed in the story of the resulting runaway.

For several years, in dealing with this side of narration, I attempted nothing more than unconnected stories of two or three paragraphs, on subjects which I assigned or the class chose for themselves. Naturally interest occasionally flagged, and in seeking a remedy for this the thought occurred to me, "Why not let them write a connected story in instalments, or chapters, if you please?"

I announced to my class, at the beginning of the second term, that we were going to write a book, "The Adventures of Johnny," Johnny to be a mischievous small boy and the adventures to be taken from various stages of his career. Each composition—one a week we wrote in this term—was to constitute a chapter of the story. I limited the length of these chapters to two pages of theme paper of the regulation size.

The class as a whole was greatly interested in "Johnny" from the start. There were a few dubious, some superior, many apathetic, members, but before we reached the end of the "Johnny"-series, out of a class of over a hundred there were not more than four or five unresponsive. Their delight in creating something—in the thought that they were "authors"—removed the idea of drudgery which the word composition is wont to suggest, and gave them an acute interest in the proceedings. Johnny became to all of us a real, live boy to whom unconsciously the boys and girls attributed their own individual traits and experiences.

In the first of the series, "Johnny's First Battle," I gave them the circumstances of the story introducing Johnny as a boy of four years, who has been given a soldier's suit and equipment with which he goes forth to conquer. The "*something*" that occasions the plot presents itself in the shape of the turkey gobbler. A battle ensues. Its issue and the consequent story the pupils were to recount according to their own ideas. I was surprised and delighted with the many clever stories that I received. I cannot resist quoting one of the many excellent ones that amazed me by naturalness and ease of expression combined with most artistic presentation.

## JOHNNY'S FIRST BATTLE

There was never a happier little boy than Johnny, on his fourth birthday, for Uncle Harry sent him a soldier suit and his papa gave him a gun which would really shoot a rubber ball. The tenth of May, Johnny's birthday, was rainy and cool, so Johnny was made to stay in the house. Before the day was over he had broken two panes of glass and hurt everyone in the house from grandma down to Baby Ruth, with "the horrid gun," as mamma called it.

That evening, Johnny's big brother was reading a book which had on the cover a picture of a soldier. Johnny asked what the man was doing, and when he was told that the man had started out to conquer the world, it set his little mind to thinking. When his mamma tucked him into bed he said, "Mamma, how big is the world?" On being told it was many, many miles around he gave a little sigh—but soon fell asleep.

When Johnny awoke, he asked his mamma to dress him in his soldier suit. After having his breakfast he started out "to conquer the world." He succeeded in subduing the world as far as the barnyard gate, when he met an old turkey gobbler who refused to be subdued. Discovering that he had left the rubber ball at home Johnny hit the turkey with his gun. At this the turkey commenced pecking and flapping his wings in Johnny's face. Johnny fought bravely, but a great turkey gobbler was too much for a four-year-old boy. Mamma heard the screams, ran to the door, and seeing what was happening ran to Johnny's assistance with a broom. Johnny was brought into the house, a very much bruised, but very happy, little boy, for he thought he had conquered at least half the world and could do the rest tomorrow.

For the next chapter or two, "Johnny Runs Away," "Johnny's First Day at School," etc., I gave only the subject with suggestions as to its possible treatment. With these I had equally pleasing results. Finally, when they had entered completely into the spirit of the story, they themselves clamored to choose their own subjects and chose them well. Here is a story whose subject-matter and expression is the pupil's very own.

## JOHNNY'S PIGEON-BOXES

At the age of ten Johnny had a great deal of work to do, at least he thought so, and often grew very angry because his plans were destroyed by his being called into the house to do some work. One day Johnny was sent out to watch his small brother, while his mother ran to one of the neighbors. The carpenters had been reshingling the summer kitchen and had left their ladder leaning against the house. Johnny saw a fine opportunity to put in operation a long-cherished plan. After fastening the baby into the chair, he went to the wood-shed after some pigeon-boxes that he had built long before. He mounted the ladder

for the purpose of putting these boxes on the roof and as he was drawing his knife from his pocket, it slipped from his fingers and landed with a loud "whack" on the head of the baby, who at once set up a howl that brought his mother in double-quick order. Johnny crawled down the ladder a very frightened boy. His fear increased as his mother appeared with a large switch and he was led into the house. What happened in the house is known only to Johnny, his mother, and the switch.

I expected that the chapters of the series would be unconnected, but I was most gratified to find that most of the pupils, after a slight hint from me, linked them together with apparent ease, so that they really formed a unified whole. I do not mean to say that their papers were not sometimes most faulty. Many needed revision and rewriting; some had little or no merit; but the majority of results proved the success of my plan. The pupils *could* and *did* learn free, easy, natural expression, such as can only come from a joy in writing.

Toward the close of the term I asked that all the stories that each pupil had written be tied together and given to me as a book. I said that those who wished might illustrate and beautify their books in any way they wished, and I would certainly credit them, but all I required was the stories neatly tied together with blank pages back and front. I wish I could show you the books that I received. There was none that I was not distinctly proud of. Some were illustrated with original drawings, arranged most artistically, others, by pictures cut from magazines and properly applied. Nearly all the books had colored covers with fancy lettering. Most of them were indexed, an occasional one was dedicated "To My Sister," "To My Brother," "To the Little Girl Next Door." Many were prefaced in a most original way.

In addition to exciting the interests of my pupils by this new treatment of composition, I gave an added stimulus to my own interest. I found that the theme-reading instead of palling upon me—as the reading of a hundred themes a week is ordinarily bound to do—became actually enjoyable. I was intensely interested in the various "Johnnies" which were evolved and anxious to know their successive adventures.

I think I have never felt so thoroughly satisfied with the results obtained from a year's work in composition, and the more so because

the class for that year was in no ways remarkable—rather a little below the average. In spite of this I had achieved tangible results with them—results that I feel sure I never could have gained had I pursued the ordinary method of composition-teaching. I feel confident that this plan can be practically and profitably followed by any English teacher. With the hope that it may prove as helpful to my fellow-teachers as it has to me I submit it to them.